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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000322

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS:ACOPE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#) [BX](#)

SUBJECT: BRUNEI FAVERS UN LEAD ON BURMA

REF: A. STATE 148530

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Classified By: DCM Justin Friedman, reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

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SUMMARY  
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[¶1.](#) (C) The GoB believes that the efforts of UN Special Representative Gambari are and should continue to be central to the international community's attempt to bring Burma toward dialogue and national reconciliation. China's leverage is probably overrated, in the GoB view. While the Bruneians believe there should be no backtracking from ASEAN on the firm stance it has taken on the recent regime crack down, they will want ASEAN to continue constructive engagement with Burma to keep the regime from slipping into further isolation. The GoB expects the ASEAN Charter to be signed next month and Burma to participate fully in the ASEAN summit. END SUMMARY.

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UN EFFORTS CENTRAL  
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[¶2.](#) (C) Drawing on ref A points, Ambassador, accompanied by DCM, discussed the state of play in Burma with Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Deputy Permanent Secretary Datin Hajah Maimunah Elias on October 25. Ambassador briefed that the new steps on sanctions President Bush announced were designed to target senior regime officials and not/not harm ordinary Burmese. The goal of the sanctions was to press the regime to engage in a real dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) and ethnic groups leading to a real process of national reconciliation and democratization. Stressing that it was important for all parties to keep the pressure on the regime, Ambassador told Datin Maimunah that ASEAN has an important role to play in encouraging positive movement and we were interested in what next steps Brunei was seeking.

[¶3.](#) (C) Datin Maimunah responded that the GoB's priority is for ASEAN collectively to urge the regime to continue the process of national reconciliation and to support UN Special Representative Gambari in his efforts. Maimunah was encouraged by the regime's opening of dialogue with ASSK and allowing Gambari to return so quickly to Burma. She cautioned that the Burmese military see themselves as the only entity in Burma holding the country together and thus "the military must be part of any solution" for long term transition and stability in Burma.

[¶4.](#) (C) Maimunah commented that Senior General Than Shwe was extremely prickly about ASSK, and would walk out of the room if her name was mentioned. Maung Aye was similarly a hard liner. She said that there were indications the military may

be split on what to do about ASSK, but they were united that the military should rule Burma.

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CHINA LEVERAGE OVERRATED  
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15. (C) Maimunah noted that China would likely prefer to keep quiet its efforts to encourage the Burma regime to engage in genuine dialogue. She cautioned that China does not have the leverage with the regime that others believe. The regime could easily respond to increased pressure by shutting off the Chinese, causing China to lose face. Isolating the regime would likely backfire, as the military has the resources to survive even in further isolation. Only the general population would suffer. Maimunah said that the GoB does not believe sanctions are a useful tool, particularly if they affect the general population.

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ENGAGEMENT ONLY WAY FORWARD  
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16. (C) The Ambassador asked for the GoB view of signaling ASEAN's continued "no business as usual" stance with Burma by such measures as limiting the regime's participation in upcoming ASEAN-led summits and ASEAN members reducing the level and frequency of mil-mil contact with the regime. Maimunah responded it was not clear that such steps would be productive. The GoB believes that continued constructive engagement with the Burmese allows ASEAN to convey its views to the regime and put across the point of the need for genuine dialogue. She posited that Than Shwe is feeling the pressure of current ASEAN and UN steps and that engagement

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was the best way to channel that pressure into positive steps and avoid a regime retreat into isolation. Maimunah said that the ASEAN Charter signing was still on track with Burma expected to fully participate in the Summit.

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UNCOMFORTABLE WITH SINGAPORE'S FORWARD LEANING STANCE  
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17. (C) Within ASEAN, Maimunah noted, Singapore is leading the discussion on next steps. When we asked about whether Brunei supported the Singaporeans, Maimunah was measured, saying only that Brunei was "fully supportive of Singapore in expressing support for the UN and its envoy, Gambari." The Singaporean Ambassador to Brunei, in a conversation with the Ambassador on October 23, was less sanguine about the Brunei view of Singapore's leadership. He observed that the GoB seems to believe that Singapore had gotten out a bit too far in front of the rest of ASEAN and was pushing too hard on Burma. The GoB is uncomfortable about straying from the ASEAN tradition of non-interference in internal affairs, probably, he surmised, because its own domestic situation was hardly an impeccable democracy or above reproach. In his view, the GoB believes that the recent "concessions" by the Burmese, such as appointing a so-called liaison to ASSK, were genuinely encouraging signs of progress and should be recognized as such.

18. (C) Finally, the Singaporean Ambassador noted that the Bruneians did not appear completely satisfied with the ASEAN consensus position of leaving attempts to solve the Burmese political crisis solely in the hands of UN Special Envoy Gambari. The GoB, he thought, believes there was still room for ASEAN to play an independent role. He hastened to add, however, that the GoB had offered no specific recommendations in that regard, but rather confined itself to asking rhetorically if ASEAN should not be doing more on its own initiative.

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COMMENT: No Backsliding, but Cautious on Next Steps  
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¶9. (C) While the GoB fully supported ASEAN's strong statement on Burma in September (ref B), the way forward remains unclear to the GoB as it perceives that even the Chinese do not appear to have the kind of leverage needed to force rapid change. Clearly, some of the GoB hesitancy to press harder and faster for change in Burma is the result of an assessment that opening the ASEAN door for intervention in members' domestic affairs could turn an unwelcome eye on Brunei's own less-than-democratic practices. We expect Brunei to quietly urge consensus around moderation and dialogue with the Burmese aimed at keeping the regime engaged and on a slow path toward reducing human rights violations over time, but not/not forcing the military out of power any time soon.

SKODON